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Removal of CIA Files From Public View is Disputed

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Spokesmen for two leading organizations of publishers and journalists told a Senate panel Tuesday that proposed legislation that would remove certain CIA files from public scrutiny threatens the balance between the government's need for secrecy and the public's right to know. STAT

"We well realize the invaluable service the CIA performs for the citizens of the United States and the need to keep some information secret," said Steven Dornfeld, president of the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi.

However, he said, "all institutions of government are answerable to the American people (and) that ideal crumbles when the need for secrecy for secrecy's sake erodes the responsiveness and accountability of the CIA or any other part of government."

Sen. Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz., chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, says he introduced the bill to help alleviate the backlog of two to three years in filling requests for information from the CIA under the Freedom of Information Act.

Opponents of the bill fear it will allow the intelligence agency to keep more information about its operations secret and to hide possible abuses from the public.

"No representative of the newspaper business wants to in any way endanger the national security of our nation or endanger the lives of those people involved in maintaining that security," said Charles Rowe, editor and co-publisher of the Fredericksburg, Va., Free Lance-Star.

Rowe told the committee that the American Newspaper Publishers Association, which he represented in testimony, believes the bill should be amended to "ensure that the immense power that would be invested in the director of CIA ... does not upset the delicate balance of the government's need for secrecy, the public's right to know and the individual's right to privacy."

"Through all my years in journalism, I've become more and more convinced of the ability of the people to govern themselves," Rowe said. "The more their information is restricted, the less able they are to govern as they should."

The Freedom of Information Act provides for public access to records of federal agencies, unless those records fall within certain types of exempt information. If the information or documents cannot be released, the CIA and other agencies are required to state why.

Goldwater's bill would allow the CIA director to decide which files of his agency would be open to review.

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